



A COLLISION OF EMPIRES

By

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The boy crouched on all fours as the savages came at him with clubs. Terrified, he could only stare unmoving as they splashed toward him in water so shallow, he could feel the ribbing of the sand under his palms and knees. In an instant, he was surrounded. They lifted him bodily, and with his clothes gushing water, ran with him and flung him onto the hard-packed sand just above the water line. He waited for the spear thrust in his back, but none came. The Indians ran off and now he inhaled the fishy smell of the wet sand where he lay.

The year was 1549. Thirteen-year-old Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda was enroute from Cartagena, Columbia, to Spain with his fifteen-year-old brother when their shipwrecked upon a coral reef off the tip of the peninsula called La Florida. The boys were natives of the Spanish colony of Columbia; their parents, Sir Garcia d'Escalante and Lady Ana de Aldana, were sending them home to Spain to be educated in the University of Salamanca, then one of the greatest centers of learning in the world.

All the ship's passengers and crew survived the shipwreck, only to be met at the shoreline by savages who dragged them from the sea and tossed them like fish onto the beach. Terrified, they feared they had been caught to be eaten, but their captors were not man-eaters; they had been taken as trophies.

Prodded from the beach to an interior stream and into large, rough-hewn canoes, they were transported over a period of days through natural inland waterways, linked by a system of man-made canals, north and west, to emerge at last into the western sea (today's Gulf of Mexico). Eventually, the canoes entered a bay where the captives beheld, among many small islands, one large, island city. Though bloody, starved, and dumb with fear, they were astonished by the twin hills of gleaming white shell and sand arising from the island. Along the level top of these great mounds were structures of wood and palm thatch and many people were in motion among them, running to see the arriving flotilla of captives.

The canoes floated at last into a wide canal with a beach and huts standing on stilts in the water. The people on the beach were leaving the mending of their fishing nets and the small fires where they were smoking fish to gather for the arrival of these Spanish, who were tribute paid to their king. The palace of the king was here, atop the higher mound, for they were in Stababa, the principal city of the empire of the Caalus.

Lying in Estero Bay off the coast of southwest Florida, Stababa is today on the National Register of Historical Places as Mound Key Archeological State Park. Thickly fringed with mangroves and overgrown to their summits, the two principal mounds of Stababa have eroded to their present height of

some thirty feet, reducing the canal that once divided them to a wet stain in the sand. Tourists walk a sandy trail posted with interpretive signs to the summits where archeologists may sometimes be found probing for artifacts, for historians believe that Mound Key was the capital city of Escampaba, the kingdom of the native Caalus (Calusa), who ruled southwest Florida for some 1500 years before the arrival of European explorers. Mound Key, says Dr. John Worth, associate professor of historical archeology at the University of West Florida in Pensacola, was the site of the first point of contact between Europeans and the native-born inhabitants of North America, or, as he succinctly phrased it, “ground zero of the European entrance into North America.”

Carbon dating suggests that Mound Key is over 2000 years old. Its 125 acres were created by the deliberate accumulation by humans of oyster shells. The Caalus were mound builders for at least three good reasons: in the watery world of southwest Florida, elevation is essential for the survival of tropical storm surges; the sea breezes at higher elevations provide relief from intolerable summer heat and biting insects; and, at a height of thirty feet or more, you can see anything coming long before it arrives.

Thus it was that the tall, slender people who lived on this mound a half a millennium ago saw the Spanish ships that were the first to explore this region long before they entered the bay.

Don Juan Ponce, of the noble León family of Castile and León in northwestern Spain, commanding a fleet of three ships, had sailed from San Juan Bautista (Puerto Rico) in March 1513, with a contract from King Ferdinand of Spain to find the island of Binini (Bimini), rumored to lie somewhere west of the island of Guanahani (San Salvador).

Sixteenth-century historian, Antonio Herrera, tells us that the ships were under sail running to the northwest on March 27, when “they saw an island that they did not recognize.” They sailed along the coastline of this island until finally, on April 2, they dropped anchor in eight fathoms of water and went ashore.

It was Easter week, and as the Spanish call Easter, “La Pascua Florida,” Don Juan named the island, “The Flowered Land,” or “La Florída.”

A few days later, de León’s ships rounded the tip of La Florída. Sailing north along its western coastline, they sighted a large bay in which were many islands with native villages and one large island with two mounds of astonishing dimension.

The Caalus were not surprised to see the Spanish coming. The empire of the Caalus extended over most of south Florida and emissaries to other peninsular kingdoms had relayed descriptions of massive, winged ships. The

reputation of the Spanish for armed aggression also had preceded them.

Upon the arrival of Ponce de León, therefore, the order was given to launch war canoes.

Suddenly confronted by scores of canoes with standing archers who rained upon his ships volleys of arrows, Juan Ponce ordered his ships to fall back out of arrow range. His fleet retreated over 200 miles to the Spanish colonial island of Cuba.

In 1521, de León returned with 200 men, priests, horses, sheep, pigs, and cattle. His intention was to colonize and Christianize and, not incidentally, add to his already sizeable landholdings in the Americas. He was met with volleys of arrows, one of which drove itself into the admiral's hip. Don Juan again retreated to Cuba, where he died of infection in the wound

Twenty-eight years later, two schoolboys were shipwrecked in the Florida Straits and floundering ashore, were captured by Caalus. Taken as tribute to King Senquene, forty-two of the ship's crew and passengers, over a period of time, were ritually beheaded. Among those slain was the elder of the two boys.

Hernando survived. The youngest of the ship's passengers, he had easily acquired the language of the Caalus and earned the fondness of the king for his ability as a translator. The continued flotsam of men taken off the

beaches from Spanish shipwrecks increasingly required the service of an interpreter.

After twenty years of captivity, however, Hernando d'Escalante regained his freedom and at the age of thirty-three, resumed his journey to Spain. There, in a letter to King Phillip II of Spain, he wrote the most complete, first-hand account of the pre-Columbian inhabitants of Florida yet discovered.

As an aid to the Spanish conquest of Florida, Escalante gave to his king not only an accurate geography of the islands and channels off the coastline of south Florida, but also descriptions of the various peninsular and island tribes with which he was familiar. No appointed foreign agent could have provided King Phillip with better naval and military intelligence.

While describing, for instance, the land of north Florida as "plentiful for livestock and for agriculture," he also warned that "In all these provinces... they are great archers, and traitors, and I hold it for very certain that they will never be at peace, and even less Christians...They [the Spanish] should capture them...and distribute them as vassals to the islands...In this manner they could be diminished..."

In a document separate from his letter, Escalante described practices of the Calusa that held for him particular horror.

“First, they have as a custom that each time a child of the chief dies, each resident sacrifices [one of] their sons or daughters...The second sacrifice is that when the male chief himself dies, or the female chief, they kill his or her own servants...The third sacrifice is that they kill every year one captive Christian in order to feed the idol that they worship, which they say eats the eyes of humans, and they dance with the head each year...And the fourth sacrifice is that after the summer there come some shamans in the figure of the devil, with some horns on their heads, and they come howling like wolves, and many other different idols that shout like animals of the woods, and these idols are there four months, during which they never rest, night or day, running with great fury. What a thing to recount the great bestiality that they perform!”

Escalante was delivered from “bestiality” on February 14, 1566, when two small brigantines, each carrying thirty soldiers and sailors, approached the bay in which Stababa sheltered. In command of the ships was Don Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, captain general of the Fleet of the Indies and adelantado (governor) of Florida. According to Menéndez’s companion and brother-in-law, Gonzalo Solís de Merás, who chronicled Menéndez’s exploits in Florida, the adelantado was “in search of some men and women that were said to have been captive for twenty years in the power of a chief called Carlos.”

The Caalus had anticipated the arrival in 1566 of Admiral Menéndez. King Calus, the young son and successor to King Senquene, had known they were coming, days, perhaps weeks of their arrival. He was eager to meet this great conqueror, Menéndez, who, only recently, had massacred the entire French colony of St. Caroline in the land of the Timucuan people. It was told to Calus that the Spaniard had built a fort (San Agustín) and then had continued down the coast of the eastern sea putting up little forts, each garrisoned with a few soldiers, along the way. Now he had come up the coast of the western sea to the land of the Caalus, “which in their language,” d’Escalante would later write, “signifies a fierce people...as in truth they are.”

Calus, himself an empire builder, appreciated the motivation and the intent of the Spanish. They were a force to be reckoned with and the best way to protect the sovereignty of his kingdom, a dominion that extended over some fifty towns in the greater part of south Florida, was through friendship, not conflict with these people. His plan was to turn their technological superiority to his own advantage.

And so, he let them in.

Seated in the launch from their flag ship, Menéndez and his officers entered the central canal of Stababa between its twin mounds of gleaming white shell, their faces lifted to the astonishing sight. Alive with upwards of a

thousand people, this island city ascended in gradations and circling pathways to a summit they could not see.

The king's interpreter, Hernando d'Escalante, painted and naked except for the deerskin around his waist, rowed out in a canoe to meet the two small brigantines approaching the coastline. Introducing himself as Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda, second son of Don Garcia d'Escalante of the royal colony of Colombia, d'Escalante said that he was the king's interpreter. The startled look on Menéndez' face at being greeted in flawless Castilian by this seeming native was comical, but he recovered quickly and with a bow, introduced himself as Don Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, Captain General of the Fleet of the Indies and Adelantado de La Florida by the grace of his Majesty King Phillip the Second of Spain.

D'Escalante led Menéndez and his wondering entourage up the long ascent to the top of the king's mound. There, before the king's house, whose interior dimensions easily accommodated 2000 people, were formally arrayed the highest-ranking nobles of the kingdom, the sun striking fire from the ornaments of silver and gold, gleaned over the years from Spanish shipwrecks, on their bare chests and arms. When the young king stepped forth from his house, Menéndez lifted his eyes to the king's face, his pupils dilating. Calus was inches taller than the Spaniard and wore a glowing crown of feathers and opalescent shell beads. Lowering his head, Menéndez de Avilés bowed deeply.

Escalante would explain to Admiral Menendez that he was an emissary of the Christian captives of the Caalus, who begged to be delivered from Carlos. Menéndez was overjoyed, for the captain was searching also for his son, who had commanded a fleet that was shipwrecked in the Florida Straits. Escalante led the eager captain and his men to the nearby coastal town where the captives were housed.

Disappointed to find only a few remaining of the estimated 200 captives taken over the years, and his son not among them, Menéndez asked Escalante to arrange a meeting aboard his ship with the king.

The brigantines were lined up with small cannons fully loaded and facing the shore when the king arrived with twenty of his highest-ranking nobles and 300 archers. Backed up by thirty arquebusiers, Captain Menéndez politely exchanged gifts with his guest. Carlos received and happily donned a shirt and jacket and taffeta pants. He then presented to Menéndez a heavy bar of silver (booty from a Spanish shipwreck). Menéndez invited Carlos and his entourage of nobles to board his ship. Nibbling curiously at the biscuits and honey and politely sipping the drink, bitter as blood, that Captain Menéndez offered him, Carlos failed to notice that the ship was drifting away from shore. Solís de Merás recorded that when Carlos was ready to disembark, "The Adelantado told him that the King of Spain, his Lord, sent him for the Christian women and children that he had, and if he did not bring them to him, he would order him killed."

Upon the king's tight-lipped orders, five captive women and three men were produced and Carlos, regal in his fury, was rowed in his taffeta breeches back to Stababa.

Now Carlos made plans to kill Menéndez, who, forewarned by Escalante, set sail for Tocobaga (present-day Tampa Bay). But when his anger had cooled, Carlos sent Menéndez an offer of friendship. According to Solís de Merás, "...he told him that he wanted to give him as a wife a sister...whom he loved very much, so that he might take her to the land of the Christians...and when she returned, he would go also and become a Christian with all his Indians..." (Calus had bartered his sister, who was forty or more years old, twice already in exchange for political alliance.) Though protesting that he already had a wife and daughter in Spain, Don Pedro could hardly refuse the honor.

The ceremony, described by Solís de Merás, began with a procession of 500 young women up the winding path to the king's palace on the summit of the mound. They sang as they came, in rounds, one section singing and the next section taking up the song and a third section joining in overlying waves of harmony, as sea waves flow one after another to shore. Menéndez brought "200 arquebusiers with him and a flag, two fifers and drummers, three trumpeters, one harp, on violin and one psaltery, and a very small dwarf, a great singer and dancer."

After dinner, Menéndez was expected to retire with the king's sister. He protested, belatedly, that he had a wife in Spain and that, among Christians, it was a great sin to have more than one living wife. Carlos replied that if he didn't consummate the marriage, the 4000 people in Stababa "would be upset, saying that [the Spanish] were laughing at them."

Possibly stalling for time, Menéndez argued that Christians could not sleep with women who weren't Christian.

Carlos argued that since he had taken Don Pedro as an elder brother, he and all his people were now Christians.

Menéndez responded that it wasn't quite that simple. That before they became Christians, they had to understand and believe certain things. Ever the diplomat, Carlos answered that because the music and food of the Spanish were superior to their own, their Christian law must be better, too. In which case, he was giving his sister to Menéndez and "They should baptize her and give her a name, and that the Adelantado should sleep with her, because this would be a great beginning...and that in no way would anything else be suitable."

Menéndez had backed himself into a corner. He knew it and Carlos knew it.

Carlos's middle-aged sister was bathed, dressed in her new Spanish clothing and christened Doña Antonia, and, finally, Menéndez took his new wife to bed.

In the morning, her attendants reported that she woke up happy. So, all was well.

Thus concluded Pedro Menéndez de Avilés's first negotiation with the natives of North America.

The morning after the wedding, Menéndez extracted his price for the marriage. He told Carlos that "he wished him to have a large cross placed next to his house, and that every day in the morning, the men and women and children should go to kiss it and worship it...and that he should remove all the rest of the idols that he had."

Carlos said that he would, only not right away. He'd wait until his sister returned from Cuba, where she was to be tutored in Christian doctrine, because then she'd be able to explain it all to him and tell him what to do.

Menéndez gave his ship's captain orders to deliver Doña Antonia and her entourage to his deputy in Havana with his instructions for their indoctrination in Roman Catholicism. He would pick them up in Havana in three or four months because he had some business to attend to in Florida.

Menéndez' business affairs over the next few months included: provisioning San Agustín, a small fort which he had established on the northeast coast of Florida a few months past; driving the French out of Santa Elena—only months before coming to Stababa, he had massacred the French Huguenots at their settlement of Fort Caroline (near Jacksonville, FL); and making “friends with the chiefs and towns he ran across” as he explored the Atlantic coastline down to the Bahama Channel and the Florida Keys.

When Menéndez returned to Stababa with Doña Antonia, he again asked Carlos if he wished to become Christian and reminded Carlos of his promise to produce the rest of his captive Christians. Carlos said he couldn't ask his people to burn their idols and become Christians just yet. They'd kill him if he did. Come back in another nine months, he suggested.

Menendez returned with Doña Antonia to Havana, but before his departure, he sent ashore Captain Francisco de Reinoso with thirty soldiers and instructions to build a fort, erect a cross, and indoctrinate the Indians. The fort was to be called, Fort San Anton de Carlos, in honor of St. Anthony and Spanish King Carlos.

When Menéndez returned to Stababa from Havana, he brought with him a Jesuit priest.

Fort San Anton was built on the smaller mound across the wide canal that bisected Stababa. The soldiers surrounded the fort compound with a thicket fence. Within this area that would ultimately garrison seventy-five soldiers, they built a church with a large wooden cross.

Reinoso reported regularly to Menéndez about events at the fort, including the many times his and his soldiers' lives had been threatened, saying also that Carlos was mocking their Christian rituals.

Carlos was not happy with Menéndez. He wanted Menéndez to help him conquer Tocabaga. Menéndez refused, saying his purpose was to make friends and Christians of the people of Tocabaga. Clearly, Captain Menéndez would not assist Carlos in extending his empire, after all. Carlos fumed and sulked, his thoughts darkening.

Carlos also argued theological matters with the priest. Rogel wanted Carlos to command his people to give up idol worship; Carlos pointed to the Christian practice of kneeling and speaking incantations before the big wooden cross they had raised in the churchyard.

Finally, Carlos grew weary of these Spanish. He decided that he would drown them all. He sent for his warrior chief, who was his cousin, to plot the slaughter with him.

Carlos was fatally innocent of his cousin's wish to be rid of him. This cousin was without honor; he had allowed the priest Rogel to christen him, "Don Felipe (Sir Phillip)." Don Felipe informed Rogel of the plot, who hastened to inform Captain Reinoso.

Reinoso invited Carlos to a meeting to discuss how they might heal the bad feeling that was growing between their people. Carlos went, and they executed him. Two of the young king's nobles who sprang to his defense were slain, also.

After Don Felipe became king, chieftains who had allied themselves with Carlos made alliance with his enemies. Don Felipe captured four of them and beheaded them and their heads were danced about on poles. Even some of his own people now plotted to kill him. When he discovered their treachery, he killed them, also.

As had Carlos, Don Felipe butted heads with the priest Rogel. They debated which was the true Trinity, that of the Roman Church or the three gods of the Calusa, but the priest was unreasonable. He demanded that all the idols sacred to the Caalus be destroyed by fire. He also insisted that the Caalus end the practice of taking multiple wives. This last Felipe would not do. But he allowed the burning of the idols.

It was a fatal mistake. He tried to regain the respect of his people by sending war canoes to attack a Spanish supply ship (near present-day

Marco Island). The Spanish arrested Don Felipe, and with as many as twenty of his nobles, beheaded him.

The Caalus now taught the Spanish a hard lesson. They walked out. They simply walked down to their canoes, got in them, and shoved off. Left to fend for themselves, the soldiers began to starve.

The three Jesuit priests who were there, along with Doña Antonia and her noblewomen were withdrawn to Havana. And in June of 1569, with Captain Reinoso, Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda sailed at last for Spain, the ancestral homeland he had never seen.

The soldiers had to quit the fort. In fact, within the next five years, all the forts established in La Florida by Don Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, except the first, San Agustín, were deserted. In 1572, all the Jesuits in La Florida were recalled, also.

With the Spanish gone, the Calusa returned to Stababa, and isolating themselves both from neighboring tribes and from the Spanish, went about their business as before. Once again, upon the interweaving waterways that they, themselves, had engineered, their kings and nobles floated upon barges, their long, slender limbs adorned with multi-colored feathers,

delicate, whimsically carved bones, the casual movements of their wrists and ankles musical with shells.

By the late 17th century, however, the tide of their life began to recede. The imperialist English to the north sent their allies, the Creek and Yemasee, to take the natives of Florida as slaves. The Caalus became so dangerously reduced by slaughter and captivity that the chief of the Caalus went to Havana to petition for missionaries, thinking that their presence might deter the raids.

In 1697, Franciscans arrived at Stababa. They brought with them agricultural implements. The response of the Caalus was entirely in keeping with their character; roughly translated, it was: "Hope you brought somebody with you to use these things, because we don't intend to." In no time at all, the Franciscans found themselves dumped on Matabombe Key, hoping to catch a lift on a passing Spanish ship.

Only a few years later, however, the Caalus, their population reduced by up to ninety percent, were, themselves, fleeing slave hunters to hide in the Keys and in the swamps. Mingling their blood with the natives of these Florida islands and Everglades, many of the Caalus never emerged again as Caalus, but others, through their emissaries, begged the Spanish for transport to Cuba, and thus, the Spanish began the evacuation of the natives of La Florida to Cuba.

By 1763, when Spain ceded the colony of La Florida to England, the surviving Caalus in La Florida were nearing extinction. Ironically, it was Spanish ships that evacuated the last of the Caalus from Escampaba to safety in Cuba.

It is not known when the last woman of the Caalus, with the last Caalus child in her arms, left her toe prints in the sand as she stepped into the canoe that took her to a waiting Spanish ship. We do know that among the Caalus emigrants to Cuba was a woman who took the name DeSayas and gave birth, in Havana, to at least two baby girls. Archeologists hope, someday, to discover a trace of their Caalus DNA lingering in the veins of the Cuban people today.